

## **2006 National COPS Conference**

### **AVOIDING THE HIGH COST OF TURNOVER<sup>1</sup>**

A discussion about recruitment would lack an important dimension without at least briefly talking about retention. Hiring new staff is one thing...keeping them is another.

During the recruitment process applicants develop a perspective about the agency through various means such as:

- Recruitment literature
- Information on the website
- Observation of agency staff in different settings
- Presentations by recruiters
- Information from other department personnel.

\_\_\_\_\_ (1) expectations = Increased chance the employee will stay  
Unmet expectations = Increased chance that employee will NOT stay.

#### **OFFICERS SWITCHING AGENCIES**

During work funded by the California Commission on Peace Officer Standards and Training, a survey of 145 California law enforcement agencies in 2005 found that retention was a problem for 72% of the respondents and 54% responded that it is a bigger problem than four years ago.<sup>2</sup> In spite of retention being an issue, another survey found less than one-third have take any definitive steps to address the issue and only 10% have drafted a written retention plan.

A query was run that searched the employment records of peace officers who were employed as of December 31, 2005. This criterion resulted in drawing data from 78,050 peace officers. A total of 17,493 currently employed peace officers, or \_\_\_\_\_ (2) percent, have worked for more than one law enforcement agency.<sup>3</sup> This same study found that since 1988 at least 3% of California Officers have switched agencies each year. The highest year was 1997 with 4.5% switching agencies.<sup>4</sup>

Twenty-five percent of the officers who left one agency for another made the transition to a second agency by 1.5 years of service with the first agency. Fifty percent made that transition by 3.8 years of service and 75% had made that transition by 8.5 years.<sup>5</sup>

#### **OFFICERS LEAVING THE PROFESSION**

How about those who leave the profession? POST automated their employment records in 1979. Since that time, more than 5,000 officers have left the profession in less than one year. Presumably a number of those failed to pass probation. However, nearly 5,000 left between one and three years of employment. This group would largely have passed probation. Another 4,700+ left between four and six years of service.

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## **SOURCES OF ATTRITION**

A study by the COPS Office found that in small agencies retention was a significant problem where two-thirds of departing officers had served for fewer than five years. Only twenty-one percent left after fifteen years or longer.<sup>6</sup> In larger agencies (serving populations in excess of 50,000) a third of the officers had served for fewer than five years when they left. However, forty-six percent stayed fifteen years or longer.<sup>7</sup>

The study also found that the annual rate of attrition was about seven percent in small agencies and five percent in large agencies.<sup>8</sup> The table below lists sources of attrition. About forty-five percent of those who left small agencies and twenty-four percent who left large agencies continued to work in law enforcement.<sup>9</sup>

## **REASONS OFFICERS LEAVE**

It is difficult to find statistics on why officers leave one employer for another. The literature focuses on these types of contributing factors for employees in general:

- Poor or ineffective supervision or management
- Unmet job expectations
- Employees not feeling valued
- Lack of coaching and feedback on performance
- No opportunity for advancement...upward or laterally
- Stress due to job demands/work-life balance
- Compensation

The literature suggests that while compensation can be a contributing factor for an employee leaving it typically is not the primary factor. Usually there are other factors of greater importance.

## **TREND – WORKFORCE PLANNING**

Many industries have seen the need to do workforce planning. This concept looks at the full employment cycle of recruiting, hiring, training, retention, succession planning and other aspects of managing a workforce in a time where knowledge workers are increasingly in high demand.

## 8 STEPS TO IMPROVING RETENTION

The following steps were recommended by subject matter experts to improve retention. To what extent do your department, and especially your supervisors, pass the litmus test outlined below?

1. Develop \_\_\_\_\_ (3) Supervisors/Managers – Relative to retention, this clearly received the most attention among all three focus groups. Improving skills in supervision, management, and leadership was strongly recommended.
2. Develop An Employee \_\_\_\_\_ (4) Culture and Policies – Employees want to feel that the organization is concerned for them and their families, especially since half of the workforce is women and more than half of the new people entering the job market are women.<sup>10</sup>
3. Develop a \_\_\_\_\_ (5) Plan – Agencies would benefit from developing a plan to retain employees as long as possible. Such a plan would include employee feedback about what they do and do not like about the agency, what would keep them working longer, and why they decide to leave. Another consideration is looking for ways to keep people and their intellectual capital longer by providing options such as part-time positions, special projects, telecommuting, and volunteer opportunities to keep them working in some capacity.
4. Engage Employees – A number of suggestions focused on looking for ways to engage employees to create a sense of \_\_\_\_\_ (6) and demonstrate their value to the organization both as an important stakeholder, and a source of expertise. This may be accomplished by soliciting their input on a wide spectrum of agency matters via focus groups, committees, or special project teams. Sincere efforts to embrace employee input were viewed as critical to keeping employees engaged and supportive of leadership.
5. Improve Communication – Employees want to feel included. Up-to-date information, especially on high profile topics, should be provided to the staff. People are interested in newsy types of information that are often found in agency newsletters. There was recognition that communication involves both “telling” and “listening.” It was also suggested that communication be proactive in dealing with potentially negative issues in a positive manner where possible.
6. Develop Staff – Providing multiple opportunities for career growth was strongly recommended. While some people may promote, many others will not. Agencies should look for ways to allow professional growth to keep employees engaged, to have a broader perspective of how the agency operates, create movement, and enhance skills.

One retention study concluded that employees want challenging work and a rational/enriched work environment (rational meaning that employees recognize what behavior you want). One suggestion was that employees be afforded opportunities to fill in behind other employees in specialized areas for up to six months in order to learn more about that area, develop an appreciation for how his/her regular assignment could better interface with the specialized area, and create a desire to continue professional growth.

### AVOIDING THE HIGH COST OF TURNOVER

7. Improve Operations – Be willing to \_\_\_\_\_ (7) traditions. Efforts to improve operations can result in a better work environment and a feeling of satisfaction for employees who help make the changes. Benchmarking best practices help employees see other ways to doing business and engage them in the process of improving operations. One suggestion for improving operations was through a peer review where peers from another agency come in and look at your operation, interview your staff and make recommendations. The agency can then take steps to enhance operations.

Another aspect of this process is considering what policies and practices are negotiable and which are not. Traditional ways of doing things are not necessarily required nor the best to retain today's workers.

8. Address Cost of Housing Issue – In many communities around California, the cost of housing is beyond the means of peace officers who work in those areas. This can contribute to officers leaving one agency for employment at another closer to where they live. Employees who do not live in the community tend to be less vested than those who do. Several programs were mentioned as possible options. One of those was the Coastal Housing Partnership serving the Santa Barbara and Ventura areas. This program focuses on assisting both private and public employees in finding affordable housing.

## **In Case You Zoned**

- |              |              |              |
|--------------|--------------|--------------|
| 1. Satisfied | 4. Friendly  | 7. Challenge |
| 2. 22.4%     | 5. Retention |              |
| 3. Effective | 6. Ownership |              |

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<sup>1</sup> This information is based on work funded by the California Commission on Peace Officer Standards and Training

<sup>2</sup> Commission on Peace Officers Standards and Training, Recruitment & Retention – Best Practices Update, Sacramento: Commission on Peace Officer Standards and Training (April 2006), 80.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 82.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 84.

<sup>6</sup> U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Hiring and Keeping Police Officers, <http://www.ncjrs.org/pdffiles1/nij/202289.pdf>, (Last viewed, 31 January 2006) 48.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Diane E. Schmidt and Gilbert Duenas, "Incentives to encourage worker-friendly organizations," Public Personnel Management, Fall 2002, [http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_qa3779/is\\_200210/ai\\_n9085336](http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qa3779/is_200210/ai_n9085336), (Last viewed, 15 December 2005).